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STATE FOR EUR, EUR/SCE (HOH, SILBERSTEIN, STINCHCOMB);
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TAGS: PGOV PREL BK

SUBJECT: BOSNIA - BANJA LUKA DEMONSTRATION WELL-CONTROLLED

REF: A. SARAJEVO 372

1B. SARAJEVO 362

Classified By: CDA Judith B. Cefkin. Reasons 1.4 (b), (d).

Summary

11. (C) February 26 protests in Banja Luka were well controlled by RS Police forces and did not reach the Branch Office. Crowds were smaller than predicted by the organizing NGO SPONA with most estimates placing the number of participants at 6,000. A small group of youths attempted to reach the Branch Office but were aggressively engaged by police using tear gas. Protesters never passed the outer police perimeter established around the Branch Office. In his address to the demonstrators, RS PM Milorad Dodik warned that the Parliament must accept the SNSD Declaration of Responsibility or RS citizens will "see what we will do." RS National Assembly Speaker Igor Radojicic drew RS-Kosovo parallels stating that other peoples who express the democratic will for independence have the right to secession.

End Summary.

Security Measures

12. (SBU) Police crowd control preparations were underway well before the official start of the demonstrations. Security measures promised by RS government officials on February 25 were implemented (Ref A). Police shut down the streets leading to the Branch Office, riot fencing was erected, seventy SWAT/riot police officers were positioned surrounding the BO along with a second tier of eighty regular police officers, a fire truck was in place near the Branch Office and police were on the roof of the hospital overlooking the surrounding area.

13. (SBU) The demonstration, adopting the same "Kosovo is Serbia" theme used by the Belgrade protest, began at approximately 1230 with a rock concert followed by addresses by RS PM Milorad Dodik and RSNA Speaker Igor Radojicic. Despite rumors that Serbian PM Vojislav Kostunica would attend the process he did not make an appearance. Dodik did, however, relay a message from President Tadic and PM Kostunica thanking the RS Serbs for their support. Although predictions that the number of participants would reach 10-15,000, most estimates of actual turnout estimated that the crowd numbered 6,000 at its height.

Small Groups Turned Away from Branch Office

¶ 14. (SBU) Following relatively brief addresses by Dodik and Radojicic the crowd dispersed quickly. Two smaller groups of protesters separated from the main demonstration area with one moving towards the Branch Office. The group of approximately 250 youths was turned away by police at the first road block. Members of the group reportedly threw several rocks with one hitting a news crew. RS Police riot squads engaged the group aggressively, including the use of tear gas, as the demonstrators attempted to reach the Branch Office by other routes before ultimately being dispersed by police. Protesters never passed the outer police perimeter and the Branch Office sustained no damage. After departing the vicinity of the Branch Office the youths vandalized a local business at which point the police made several arrests. By 2:30 demonstrators had dispersed entirely.

¶ 15. (SBU) Unlike the Belgrade rally, neither the demonstration nor the addresses by Dodik and Radojicic received live coverage by RS-based electronic media. According to press reports Dodik's remarks repeated familiar themes from his recent speech to the RNA including that "BiH will never recognize Kosovo independence. Otherwise, we shall see what we shall do." Referring to the draft SNSD Declaration of Responsibility (Ref B), Dodik stated that "the RS wants development and stability and requires the BiH Parliament to recognize the RS," repeating that "if they do not want to do it, we shall see what we shall do." Noting that he was traveling to Brussels to attend PIC events, Dodik stated he would "tell them I am coming from a magnificent gathering and the consistent reaction of this people to any injustice."

Dodik-Radojicic Speeches

¶ 16. (SBU) Dodik also repeated themes from his Belgrade address stating that "peaceful protests are the only and best response to the injustice of the recognition of Kosovo independence." He added that the "international community will not be able to impose decisions to the RS in future, because we are here to prevent it in a peaceful and dignified manner." In his speech Radojicic hewed to familiar SNSD language linking the RS and Kosovo including that "if the world recognizes the independent Kosovo, then all the others, throughout the world, who start the issue of independence with democratically expressed will of their people, do have the right on independence."

Comment

¶ 17. (C) It was clear that the outcome of the Banja Luka demonstrations would depend on how Dodik chose to use the situation. In this case he appears to have acted on the belief that additional violence, after the violent demonstrations on February 21, would not serve RS interests. The decisive actions by the RS police, including the use of tear gas, suggest they were under strict instructions not to let the demonstration get out of hand. Reports claiming that RS police were also stopping buses full of protesters before they reached Banja Luka bolster this conclusion. It was also telling RS-based media, clearly acting on Dodik's orders, did not broadcast live coverage of the event preventing a potential catalyst for additional spontaneous disturbances. Dodik did, however, use the event to reinforce his "do not tread on us" message, warning against any moves that would threaten the existence of the RS. End Comment.

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